

Pilgrim Nuclear Plant

Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, October 16, 1996

18

(The following is reprinted with permission from the Cape Cod Times)

Pilgrim Nuclear Plant An Albatross

By BILL SARGENT

The United States is facing a financial and environmental scandal that will soon make the savings and loan scandal pale in comparison. It is our inability to decommission nuclear power plants.

Technology has made it possible to deregulate energy and save customers money on their electric bills. However, there is a downside to this brave new world of deregulation. pressure is mounting on energy companies to become more competitive. That means closing uneconomic nuclear power plants that hang around the necks of power companies like albatrosses.

We have a perfect example in Massachusetts. Boston Edison is a prime target for a hostile takeover because of deregulation. It has already negotiated at \$2.2 million golden parachute to protect its three top corporate officers if the company is sold.

But what about you and me? How will we be protected from the fiscal and environmental fallout from the sale of Boston Edison? The first thing any buyer will want to do is decommission the Pilgrim nuclear power plant in Plymouth.

It will take anywhere from \$500 million to \$1 billion to decommission Pilgrim. The same is true for the 109 other nuclear power plants that the Wall Street Journal predicts the industry will want to decommission in the next 10 years.

But neither the companies nor the takeover firms have the finances to decommission these plants. So who is going to pay? you and I. We are going to end up paying up to \$100 billion in higher rates, in higher taxes, in a larger deficit.

However, the kicker is that there is no way to decommission these plants. I have been inside the Pilgrim plant and peered into its eerie blue moon pool that holds 23 years worth of spent fuel. All that lies between you and me and that highly radioactive waste is a swimming pool full of water. If a crack forms, if a cooling water pump fails, if the pool drains, that fuel will melt down in what has been called a China Syndrome accident. Such an event, called a Spent Fuel Pool Accident, is far more dangerous than a core accident such as the one at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island.

Spent Fuel Pool Accidents occur outside of the containment area and involve far more fuel. Pilgrim has 10 times more fuel in its spent fuel pool than in its core. Despite its name the spent fuel is every bit as combustible and dangerous as the fuel in the reactor itself.

What would happen if the spent fuel melted down? Remember what the Labor Day traffic was like when Hurricane Edouard was threatening the Cape. Now imagine what it would be like if an accident occurred at Pilgrim. More than half a million people would be trying to get off Cape Cod.

And you know what? The evacuation plans call for the closing of the Sagamore Bridge, so the 100,000 people who live within 10 miles of the plant could drive west. What about the 600,000 people on Cape Cod who are in the path of the prevailing winds?

The final problem is that there is no way to get rid of high-level nuclear waste. President Clinton vetoed the Yucca Mountain interim high-level waste repository in Nevada, and pundits predict that for now there is no way Congress will vote for a permanent site.

The citizens of Nevada are no more eager to host a high-level nuclear waste site than are the people of Massachusetts.

But there is a big difference between Nevada and Massachusetts. Nevada can keep the waste out. We have no choice. We are stuck with 13 fuel rod cores sitting in permanent storage in a swimming pool designed for the temporary storage of one-third of a fuel rod core.

Without proper financing, engineered redundancies and tight security that fuel could melt down.

If Congress does not pass the Yucca Mountain high-level waste repository, Massachusetts will be left with this ticking bomb for the next 10,000 years.

In the meantime, the Massachusetts delegation should call for an independent assessment of the economic viability of the Pilgrim nuclear plant, and insist that Boston Edison or any potential buyer of Pilgrim has a reserve of \$1 billion to decommission the plant properly.